Interview with Dan Oleksiw

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DAN OLEKSIW

Interviewed by: Hans N. Tuch

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Q: Good morning. This is Hans Tuch interviewing Dan Oleksiw in Bethesda, Maryland on February 8, 1989.

Good morning, Dan.

OLEKSIW: Good morning, Tom.

Q: Dan Oleksiw was born in 1921 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He is currently the director for marketing of the Washington Export Information, Incorporated, a private consulting firm.

I am interviewing Dan this morning about part of his career in the foreign service, in USIA. He retired from USIA in 1978, having spent the last five years in his USIA career as thechief inspector of USIA.

He spent over thirty years in government service, most of it in USIA. How many years? When did you start in USIA?

OLEKSIW: Forty — well, before USIA?

Q: Yes, in the State Department.

OLEKSIW: Nineteen forty-nine.

1966 - '70: Period as Assistant Director, USIA, Far East

Q: One of his most significant and, as far as I'm concerned, most interesting assignments in USIA was as the assistant director of USIA for the Far East, which is now called the Pacific area, during a very important period in our history, namely between 1966 and '70, during the Vietnam war.

I would think it is particularly useful for this oral history project to talk about your experiences, your impressions, your recollections of that period in your career in USIA.

Now, you were assistant director, you became assistant director for the Far East area in 1966, just at a time when we were expanding our involvement in Vietnam.

Let me ask you: who appointed you? Why were you appointed director for that area? What were your initial responsibilities, or what was your particular mission in that job?

OLEKSIW: Leonard Marks appointed me as area director in '66. I asked him why he appointed me when he did, or when he talked to me about taking on the job, because at that time I had never been west of California or east of Calcutta.

I had served in Turkey, Egypt, Iran and India. That was the part of the world that I knew something about. I knew something about Africa because I had been program coordinator and, for a while, deputy to Ned Roberts in Africa. I knew very little, if anything, about the Far East.

Mr. Marks said very nice things about why he wanted me to be the area director. Frankly, I think that he just couldn't find anybody else available at the time to take the job.I went into the job with a good deal of question about my own qualifications for it. I tried to do it with a great deal of humility. I was somewhat intimidated by some of the great Far East hands who were PAOs in the area at the time.

Q: Barry Zorthian was already there?

OLEKSIW: Barry Zorthian was director of JUSPAO at the time.

To focus on Vietnam, which you've asked me to do, I think we now have the benefit of — the usual benefit of hindsight.

Oleksiw Views on, and Questions About, USIA's Actions in and Commitment to Vietnam

My views on Vietnam now — USIA and Vietnam — my views on Vietnam now may be a little bit different than they were while I had the responsibility for the area, but not all that different, if I recollect properly.

One of the questions I asked myself in preparation for coming to talk to you today, and which I used to ask myself when I was area director and dealing with Barry Zorthian, Ed Nickel and the other people who were responsible for Vietnam —

Q: And of course the director of the Agency.

OLEKSIW: — and the director of the Agency. The directors of the Agency, because I worked under — on Vietnam specifically I worked under Leonard Marks and Frank Shakespeare.

The question that I asked myself then, but more in the last few days, in anticipation of coming here for this interview, was: What did we accomplish, what did USIA accomplish in Vietnam?

I try to simplify the question without being simplistic by asking: What was USIA supposed to accomplish in Vietnam?

When I became inspector for the Agency, I used to try to differentiate, in looking at our programs, differentiate between effort and accomplishment. Without denigrating effort, I felt that what really counted was the accomplishment. Obviously, the effort is essential in order to get to the accomplishment.

In Vietnam we saw a great deal of effort, very commendable effort, many times courageous effort, effort under very difficult conditions.

To try to measure accomplishment was very, very hard. Measuring accomplishment in areas which are not terribly tangible is difficult.

When people cannot demonstrate accomplishment, and they know that they are being measured, compensated, promoted, advanced, reassigned on the basis of their reputation in an assignment, when they can't demonstrate accomplishment adequately, they're very busy demonstrating effort. That's translated into activity very often.

I would not denigrate in any way the effort of our programs — plural, programs — in Vietnam. People who were undertaking them, from the directors of JUSPAO down to the most junior people on the staff, most of them, almost all of them, were working with a great deal of sincerity in trying to accomplish what they thought was in line with the responsibility that was thrust on them.

At least in those days, that is the perception that the leadership in Washington reflected, that this was a responsibility thrust on the Agency.

I've often tried to figure this out. I try to question this: Did we seek that responsibility, that role, which came during Carl Rowan's directorship? Did we seek it or was it imposed on us?

I get various believable answers, contradictory but believable answers from different people.

Q: Who was your predecessor as assistant director?

OLEKSIW: Dan Moore. In the original days it was, in the days of the establishment of JUSPAO, Ken Bunce.

Q: He was the reflective scholar type of person; and his expertise, especially in regard to Japan, was based on his deep knowledge and experience in that particular area, rather than being an activist in the field of public diplomacy.Am I correct in my judgment?

OLEKSIW: Yes, if you mean that without in any way minimizing his abilities in the field.

Q: Yes.

OLEKSIW: He had a very responsible position in General MacArthur's staff as the religious advisor. He had a great deal of experience, and he had post experience. He had been PAO in India.

Q: And PAO in Japan.

OLEKSIW: And Korea.

Q: As far as I am concerned, one of the heroes of USIA. He was not, by inclination, as others have been, a sort of gung-ho person who would, because an administration felt we ought to get involved, just go in blindly and say, “This is what we're going to do.” He was a person who would have to be convinced that what we were doing was the right thing.

OLEKSIW: Yes, I want to agree with that. I would agree with that.

Q: I'm sorry. I interrupted. We were talking about whether this mission in Vietnam was thrust upon us, or whether we actually sought it.

That was during the period 1964 - '65, when Carl Rowan was the director of USIA. It's something that one would have to explore with him some day.

OLEKSIW: Yes.

Q: How about Leonard, Leonard Marks? What about his view on this?

OLEKSIW: Mr. Marks was, in my judgment, an honest pragmatist; I thought, a very logical conduit for policy and operational requirements that we received from the White House, and policy guidance from the State Department.

He was a terrific administrator and had the benefit of having Howard Chernoff at his elbow during those years.

I have this impression, and I think it is based on a lot of conversations that we had on the subject.

I believe that he was concerned that we were over committed in Vietnam.

The expense of JUSPAO, in dollars and in people — because there were finite resources available to the Agency — was at the risk of jeopardizing other very important programs.

Working in that area during the Vietnam years reminded me somewhat of earlier days in Africa when Africa got very high priority at the expense of other posts.

Judgments on Accomplishments Compared to Goals in Vietnam

My original, my question: What did we accomplish in Vietnam? To ponder the question, the argument could be made that, by the end, the resources that we put into JUSPAO, the people who worked in Vietnam for all those years, that we did not accomplish what we set out to accomplish. This is a very sad thing to have to reflect after all that investment of people, money and energy.

Stated against the question of what did the United States accomplish in Vietnam, that may not be such a devastating judgment if that judgment is correct. It's especially hard to address people who worked in Vietnam, who did so with such great dedication and great enthusiasm and sacrifice. Maybe that was one of the problems, that people tend to get intoxicated by their own enthusiasm.

Q: Was there any discussion in depth here in Washington at the time in the leadership of the Agency, among the leadership of the Agency, evaluating our tremendous investment? It was an unprecedented investment in manpower and materials that we made in Vietnam at the time, especially in comparison to what we were doing in the rest of the world, and we had other priority areas: Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, you had mentioned Africa during the '60s.

Discussions at Agency Headquarters Re Value of USIA Role in Vietnam: Marks and Shakespeare

Was there any major discussion, at that time, is this worthwhile? Is this what we should be doing, or is this really beyond our capabilities, or is this not the mission that USIA ought to fulfill?

OLEKSIW: Yes, very much so, led by Leonard Marks and later by Frank Shakespeare.

Q: Really?

OLEKSIW: Certainly!

Q: Frank Shakespeare, too?

OLEKSIW: Oh, yes, very thoughtfully!

Q: Because I thought he was just so involved in doing it that the question of why and whether didn't arise. I may be wrong. I'd like to hear you —

OLEKSIW: Yes, that would be wrong. I recall — and I think this can be demonstrated by a search of the records. I would say that Leonard Marks was interested in maintaining the level and containing the level of our involvement in Vietnam, which was a very great involvement.

Ten percent of our foreign service employees were in Vietnam at any given time.

Q: This was in 1966 already?

OLEKSIW: From '66 through '70 at least. We built up very quickly. I refer you to the records. It was in 1966. It was a hundred and thirty plus. I'm talking about American job slots, not money. The money was easier to come by in those days than people.

Q: Yes.

OLEKSIW: Ten percent of our foreign service personnel were in Vietnam, one hundred and thirty-some out of thirteen hundred-some American foreign service people.

My instructions from Leonard Marks were that this level reflected the instructions and guidances that the Agency then had from the White House, President Johnson's White House, and policy guidances from the State Department.

But Leonard Marks also believed that we — at least, this is my reading of his belief — that we should not at that time get more deeply involved in Vietnam.

We were trying to limit, then, our involvement in Vietnam to carry out our worldwide responsibilities. We just didn't have the human resources to do more.

By the time Frank Shakespeare became director we were definitely trying to cut —

Q: In '68, right?

OLEKSIW: Yes. We were trying to cut down our investment in Vietnam.

Even before that, during Mr. Marks' leadership that had started already, and not only Vietnam but related programs in Thailand where USIA found itself, as I used to say to Lew Schmidt's chagrin, we were involved in everything from midwifery to supporting the internal ministry of information programs in Thailand and in Laos, because these were part of —

Q: They were related, yes.

OLEKSIW: Very, very, very closely related.

Oleksiw Delineates What He Views as USIA's Role(s) in Vietnam

Q: Well, how would you define, then, during that period, the principal mission that was thrust upon us, or that we assumed in Vietnam with all those resources, with all those people — how would you define what we were supposed to accomplish there, or what we were supposed to do?

OLEKSIW: Leonard Marks inherited a complex and to some degree ambiguous role for USIA. It was more than bifurcated; it was more than trifurcated. It was probably quadrafurcated, or whatever the term is. Depending on what you're counting, we had four roles.

A. Influencing U.S. Opinion Re Vietnam Involvement

One of the roles which I'll mention first is one that maybe is the most questionable, and that is influencing U.S. public opinion.

Q: We had the mission of influencing U.S. public opinion?

OLEKSIW: JUSPAO was implementing that mission. How we got the mission has always been very fuzzy to me.

It could be defended that technically the mission was the military's and that JUSPAO, which was the Joint U.S.-Public Affairs Office, was directing or “coordinating” the effort, but the cover was that the military was doing this. Who could say that we did not have the mission or accept the mission of influencing U.S. public opinion? By simply servicing the press that was covering the war we impacted on public opinion everywhere, including the U.S.

We definitely were, there's no question about it. We were trying to justify U.S. policies and U.S. actions during a hectic time in this country.

Of course, we were involved in informing the American public, and therefore, inevitably, in influencing American public opinion about Vietnam. USIA was deeply involved in that.

Q: This is very interesting, particularly because perhaps for the first time it really goes against both the legislation and tradition of our Agency, namely, that we should not and would not be involved in any way vis-a-vis the American public, but that our mission was always directed to foreign publics, foreign public opinion and attitudes.

So this is one specific mission that you identified.

OLEKSIW: Yes, except that I would like to say this, too: that traditionally, also, USIS posts had the press attaché function, the care and feeding of foreign correspondents.

American correspondents and others who came to a post, when they were writing and reporting on what was happening in Country X, it had nothing to do with Vietnam, whatever country, India, Germany or whatever.

Inevitably, USIS was involved in helping them understand American policy toward that country and American activities in that country. To differentiate between justifying American policy and influencing American public opinion is impossible under such operational situations.

So I think that, although the legislation says, “You don't do it,” our activities, if they didn't step over the line in other countries, they were smudging that line. I believe that, frankly, they did step over the line of many countries.

(Pause.)

Okay, your question was about USIA's role. I believe you have to dissect it. There are a number of roles.

Q: You mentioned four. We've talked about the first.

OLEKSIW: Right, we've talked about the first one, which was servicing foreign correspondents.

The spokesman role in any embassy, in any USIS mission, exists, and I personally see this as an unavoidable anomaly. In other words, sometimes we are really serving U.S. correspondents who report to the U.S. public, but is that somewhat out of the ordinary for us to do?

Q: In other words, our focus is the foreign press.

OLEKSIW: Oh, yes, yes. Our focus is the foreign audience. In any, especially in any large country, or any country that's in the news, USIS gets involved in handling American and other foreign correspondents.

When you're handling the American press, you obviously try to explain and justify U.S. foreign policy. In doing so, you get involved in influencing American opinion. Should we be ashamed to explain, justify an administration's policies to a groping newsman?

I've had to be as guilty of that as anybody. So I'm not sticking my finger in somebody's eye in Vietnam, saying “You shouldn't have done this.” Because of the nature of the coverage of the Vietnam war, the tormented interest in that war and the number of correspondents there, the television aspects of it, we were constantly and very deeply, deeply, deeply involved in that.

Incidentally, insofar as they handled the press, when I say the foreign press they were handling press from many countries, not just the American press. There were correspondents from all over the world there. Through them JUSPAO informed and clarified the war to millions in every corner of the globe.

So it was a quite legitimate role, at the same time, quite a legitimate role for JUSPAO to be facilitating the coverage by the press from every foreign country where we had an interest in explaining American policies and the implementation of American policies.

One could not have done one without the other. So, insofar as it was right, let us say, to try to set straight the record in Sweden, which was highly critical of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, we couldn't have done that without also getting involved with American coverage.

B. Psychological Warfare Role

Okay, we have the psychological warfare role, psy-warfare.

Q: It's the second role.

OLEKSIW: Well, I don't put them in any particular order. One is the foreign press; two, the psy-warfare, which is not and certainly has not been a traditional USIA or legislated USIA role.

C. Addressing Population of South Vietnam

The third role was addressing the population of South Vietnam. The traditional USIA role, the information and cultural affairs role.

Then related, perhaps, to psy-warfare, and to that traditional role, was our involvement with the South Vietnamese ministry of information.

Q: Their infrastructure?

OLEKSIW: The infrastructure.

D. And Explaining/Supporting the Activities of South Vietnam Government to Its Own People

Yes, explaining and defending the activities of the government of South Vietnam. We were deeply involved in that, explaining it to the population of South Vietnam and to the rest of the world, including the United States.

Q: There were then two areas which were unique to USIA. One, psychological warfare, the psychological warfare role, which we heretofore had not been involved in —

OLEKSIW: No, we had.

Q: We had?

OLEKSIW: We had, in Central America.

Q: Yes, indeed, you're right.

OLEKSIW: One might question whether, because it wasn't all that many years before that — in El Salvador.

Q: Yes, right.

Precedents for USIA Involvement in Psy-War Activities

OLEKSIW: There are precedents.

Q: Limited, limited precedents.

OLEKSIW: Limited number of precedents?

Q: I mean limit of involvement and intensity, right?

OLEKSIW: When I was in Iran as deputy PAO to Bob Payne and then Burnett Anderson, USIS was very, very, very deeply involved in supporting the Shah through the Iran Ministry of Information.

We were deeply, deeply involved in a form of psychological warfare, working hand-in-hand with the British, with the Baghdad Pact countries, with the secret police of Iran.

There are other examples of that around the world. But Vietnam was our greatest ever involvement, both in intensity and in size, but there were other examples.

The one which could have led to activities in Vietnam was the Central American experience.

Q: Okay, now you had these four central missions for which we had responsibility.

There was, at that time, as you said, a great increase in our activities to fulfill the responsibility.

Impact of Heavy Agency Resource Commitment in Vietnam on Other Agency Programs

How were you able to manage that within the overall USIA complex? Having ten percent of our people there, having probably more than ten percent of our resources involved in Vietnam, this must have been a tremendous burden on you as the area director to implement that.

OLEKSIW: It was a tremendous burden on the Agency.

Q: Just to find the people.

OLEKSIW: Just to find the people. We had the priorities and the authority to draft which made it a lot easier for the area and for the program in Vietnam.

What impact it had on other programs can't be documented specifically, but PAOs from all over the world and all the other area directors told me, of course, that it had an operational impact on their programs, and everyone knew it had an impact on morale in the Agency.

My conviction is that most people in USIA who served in Vietnam would not have chosen to serve in Vietnam — and I don't want this to mean that when they were there, once they were assigned to Vietnam, and once they hit the deck there, that they didn't work as hard as they possibly could, or work as well, as imaginatively, as courageously. Most of them tried to fulfill the mission.

And Impact on Families

Some of them didn't want to leave their families. Remember that this was a time when you left your family, either at home on the United States or at a safe haven country, Thailand, the Philippines or whatever. It was wrenching.

At one point the personnel officer for the area, in 1970 I think it was, told me that we had had eighteen divorces, related to but not necessarily totally caused by Vietnam.

We had wives coming to see us, sometimes without their husbands' knowledge, sometimes with their husbands' knowledge, telling us how assignment to Vietnam would affect the marriage, how it would affect their children, who needed the father's attention.

It was difficult to handle. We did have a protocol for handling it. That was that if there was, say, a psychological or psychiatric problem involving the family, we asked the State Department doctors to evaluate this with the officer's own family doctor. Obviously, we would listen to reason.

Relationships with Officers in the Field

Q: Tell me, how did the operational relationship work between Washington, you as the area director, and the field PAOs? Was it smooth? Was it a good relationship, or were there major policy and operational differences between Washington and the field?

OLEKSIW: From my standpoint, I thought that the relationship was amazingly smooth, given the necessarily confrontational nature of the relationship when we had to contain and reduce our involvement — necessarily confrontational because there seemed to be some split loyalties in Saigon when the program was trying to be responsive to the urgings of the ambassador and other people in the country team — and the area was operating under policy interpretations as Washington saw them.

I say “amazingly smooth” in that Barry Zorthian and Ed Nickel never put poison in my food when I visited them, and I visited them quite often.

We argued a great deal about what was the proper level of program and the character and degree of that involvement. They felt, with considerable justification, that they weren't getting the support that they thought they needed. I had to represent Washington's view, which was that here is the support we were able to give, or that we thought was proper.

When I say “we,” I wasn't speaking just for myself. I was speaking for Mr. Marks and Mr. Shakespeare, and what White House judgments were regarding our involvement.

Q: For the record, let me just interject. Barry Zorthian was the head of JUSPAO, the public affairs officer in Vietnam until 1968 or so.

OLEKSIW: Ed Nickel succeeded him as director of JUSPAO. Barry stayed on for a few months.

Q: As the personal advisor —

OLEKSIW: To Ambassador Bunker.

Q: It's very interesting that your difficulties in running a program, in operating a post, very often really come down to personalities, to the actual putting the right person in the right slot and convincing others that you've made the right decision, and convincing the person that you've made the right decision that he should or should not be in the particular job. I mean, one spends a tremendous amount of time in personnel matters when one manages an operation or manages a post. Do you agree with that?

OLEKSIW: Yes, and related, considering the impact that Vietnam had on other area directors and other posts seeking people to assign to their program when Vietnam could pull the rug out from under almost any assignment in the Agency. This happened repeatedly.

Oleksiw Comments on Things He Might Have Done Better Re Vietnam

Q: Dan, we've been talking about your experiences in relation to Vietnam, and we may want to talk about something else, too. In conclusion about Vietnam, do you find that you learned anything or that you had any lessons that became clear to you after Vietnam that you think are interesting or important or significant to mention here?

OLEKSIW: Yes. Let me mention a few things that have bothered me since Vietnam, because these are things that I should have tried to do and we just didn't, or didn't do them well enough.

One is this, one of the problems that our people in Vietnam worked under was the atmosphere that pervaded American society during those years.

They were there working very hard, working loyally, but they were not persuaded of the correctness of American policy and American actions toward the issue.

Although all those I knew, all, as far as I knew, worked loyally and as well as they could, as effectively as they could, obviously they would have worked more effectively had they been persuaded that the American position was correct, that American policy was correct, that American actions were correct.

Where we had failed them, my area had failed them, was that we did not arrange sufficient orientation before they went there. That's my fault.

We should have spent more time on educating them about American policies and the reasons for American policy, and persuading them that what we were doing was the best that the administration could do at the time. We didn't do enough of that.

We spent a lot of time on teaching them the language. I question the value, the little language that most of them learned before they went to Vietnam. Some learned the language well and found it useful. Those who went through language training, by and large, my judgment is that those whom I knew who talked to me about it, they were not

able to use the language effectively. It was not a good investment in the case of many people.

The other thing that I might bring to bear here is that I know that some of the officers who served in Vietnam were, in a way, tainted by association with Vietnam when they went on to other posts later.

They found that having served in Vietnam could be an embarrassment in a future post. They were considered by some of the people in the countries where they went later as having been involved in non-USIA activities, which they were. Some told me that they were suspect in the countries where they were involved.

That's something to consider, especially if you look at what USIA officers really were doing in Vietnam. This is the advantage of hindsight, but we're talking about lessons for the future.

Many of the positions held by USIA people in Vietnam could have been handled as well, or better, by non-USIA people on a contract basis, and thereby not disrupting our ranks and cutting the availability of our people for jobs elsewhere.

Q: What kind of people?

OLEKSIW: Field support people, especially. We had people in field support positions.

Q: What does that mean? Again, for the record, field support?

OLEKSIW: Well, in a way, they were supply sergeants. They were sending things to our field posts throughout Vietnam, everything from candy to be distributed to children to prove to them that America loved Vietnam.

Q: Field support people.

OLEKSIW: That was one. People in the field, too, who were then supporting sign-up operations and who were facilitating the travel of correspondents and who were doing sign-up operations — it was a fairly simple nature.

The direction had to be by experienced USIA officers, but the support could have been — we could have, say, maybe a third of our positions in Vietnam that way. A third would have been maybe forty-five positions.

USIA Lessons to Be Learned from Vietnam Experience

I guess the most important lesson that I came away with relates to supporting a crisis situation of this sort — and it was a crisis situation. USIA comported itself with dignity and professionalism in Vietnam, even though we can't measure what we contributed to the overall effort, whose accomplishment I question, and therefore I have to question the accomplishment of the Agency in Vietnam.

If we get into another crisis situation of this sort, and it's predictable that we can in the future, a very important component of the planning for our participation in something of this sort has to be: How do we do it without doing damage to other programs, especially other critical programs around the world?

Now, the obvious answer to that might be, well, of course we were trying to be sure that we did not adversely affect critical programs in other parts of the world.

I think there are imaginative ways that ought to be considered in the future. Indeed, that kind of planning can be done ahead of time, and bringing on some contract people for short term would strike me as an obvious part of the planning.

When we think out loud about Vietnam during the four years that I had some responsibility for supporting Ed Nickel and Barry Zorthian in various programs there, I am not being critical of any individuals. Everybody worked there under great difficulties, and many of

them with considerable reluctance, and certainly at a cost to their convenience and their safety and their family bliss. I admire those who did it in good spirit.

But looking toward the future, we ought to learn all the lessons we can from that very costly experience.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to think out loud with you.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

End of interview